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ABSTRACT

Focused on the practical tools that education leaders can use to improve communications with their own colleagues, with parents, and with the general public, this guide can be used by school districts and states to organize their communication efforts strategically to build public support. The guide includes step-by-step information to develop a strategic communications plan that helps school, district, or state department staff set priorities, spend scarce resources more wisely, listen and respond to the needs and concerns of people inside and outside the education community, target activities to those most affected by and concerned about education improvement efforts, and regularly measure results. After a foreword, sections of the guide are: "Why Bother?"; "Building the Teams"; "How to Develop Your Plan"; "What Goes into Your Plan"; and "Conclusion." A 44-item list of resources is attached. (RS)

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A-PLUS COMMUNICATIONS
EDUCATION COMMISSION OF THE STATES

Building Community Support for Schools:

A Practical Guide to Strategic Communications

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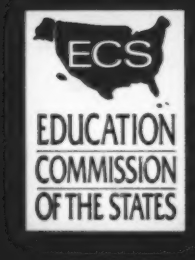

IS THIS GUIDE FOR YOU?

It is if you are:

- A communications professional at the school, district or state level
- Interested in having your community understand and support school improvement efforts
- Ready to listen to people's needs and concerns about their schools and act on what you hear
- Looking to spend time and money on strategies that work!

Elements of a Strategic Communications Plan

- Develop a comprehensive education improvement plan and accompanying communications plan.
- Use polls and focus groups to surface public concerns and questions about education. You must know what community members see as problems in schools before you present solutions.
- Identify groups and individuals who need to be involved. Create key messages that respond to distinct groups, yet communicate consistently about the proposed changes.
- Develop examples and materials. People need the chance to see rather than just hear about changes in schools.
- Build coalitions. Enlist and maintain the support of influential business and community leaders who can marshal resources behind your efforts to improve achievement.
- Anticipate, respond to and involve critics. You must be ready to answer their concerns and benefit from their constructive criticism.
- Communicate progress. Community members need to see movement toward goals of higher student achievement.

A-PLUS COMMUNICATIONS
EDUCATION COMMISSION OF THE STATES

Building Community Support for Schools:

A Practical Guide to Strategic Communications

By
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June 1997

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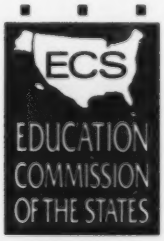

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The Education Commission of the States (ECS) is a nonprofit, nationwide interstate compact formed in 1965 to help governors, state legislators, state education officials and others develop policies to improve the quality of education. The ECS office is located in Denver, Colorado.

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FOREWORD

"If enough has not been hitherto done for education, it is because public sentiment has not demanded it; and if we attempt to go in advance of that sentiment, we shall not be followed and shall be forced to retreat."

— Ohio State Constitution Education Clause, adopted 1851

This document is about the practical work of building public support for good schools. What does it mean to involve the public and build support for school improvement? It does not mean "spinning," selling and marketing school improvements at a furious pitch. Rather, involving the public is a consistent effort to listen long and hard to your community (this includes people inside the school community as well as the broader public), understand people's needs and concerns, take these issues seriously, and be prepared to let them influence the design and implementation of policy.

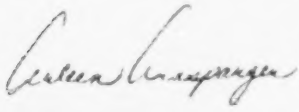
Such an approach reflects a new way of understanding public involvement, one that recognizes the need to build the community's involvement and understanding as changes are considered — not after the fact. In this view, strategic communications, policy development and changes in practice are inextricably linked. The result: better-supported policies and practices, better-understood policies and practices and, most important, better policies and practices.

History proves this point. When education leaders have tried to "sell" changes, their efforts have failed. In the past few years, for example, Pennsylvania had to reverse course on its state learning goals after public outcry over the educational direction the state had chosen. In California, a new testing system that was widely

praised by education experts was scrapped by a legislature that had become convinced that state education officials had not seriously considered the concerns of parents. In both places, state officials were unprepared and ill-equipped to handle the ensuing controversies. In contrast, as the examples in this publication show, leaders who have had back-and-forth conversations with their communities have created more successful policies as a result. Such two-way communication helps policymakers and practitioners pinpoint legitimate concerns about proposed changes, refine their innovations and test the assumptions underlying their initiatives. All of these activities build credibility, stronger ties to the community and more trust.

We've tried to provide a guide that can be used by school districts and states to organize their communication efforts strategically to build public support. This guide is focused on the practical tools that education leaders can use to improve communications with their own colleagues, with parents and with the general public. Many schools, districts and states are showing results from using these tools, including sites across the country that are working with the New American Schools initiative and other promising school improvement networks.

The information in this guide is based on experience, expertise and common sense. We do not pretend that this work is easy. But it can be done in the same way as most students can reach high standards — with consistent effort and a focus on the ultimate goal of improving student achievement.



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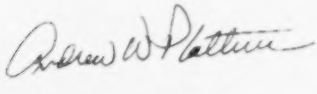

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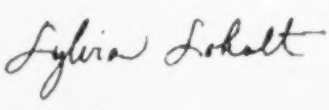

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WHY BOTHER?

Across the country, states, districts and schools are trying to do business differently, to make changes that result in improved student achievement. These changes often involve higher academic standards, new kinds of tests, new ways of organizing schools and delivering instruction, more accountability for teachers and schools, and new policies to support school improvement on a broad scale.

People who have been at these kinds of changes for a while have recognized that their efforts to improve schooling may go nowhere unless they also have a concerted plan for building public support for quality education. And if a reform fails due to lack of public support, the end result is that student achievement doesn't improve.

For these states, schools and districts to be successful, they must focus on changes in policy and practice, but also on strategic communications. Strategic communications is about keeping everyone — starting with the superintendent and school board or state board, whose support is crucial — focused on student achievement, building public support for that achievement, showing what that achievement looks like and demonstrating how improved student achievement benefits everyone.

What Makes a Strategic Communications Plan *Strategic*?

- **Ties school improvement plans to what the public wants to know.**
- **Helps you carry out the work with the potential for the greatest impact.**
- **Allows you to match the work to the available resources (both money and people) and identify where you can get additional help.**
- **Involves more planning ahead and less communication by crisis; the work that should be routine and predictable becomes more routine and predictable.**
- **Provides a coherent picture of the overall work, not a fragmented laundry list of programs and activities.**
- **Keeps you focused on your goal and helps you see how each piece of the plan moves you closer to the goal.**

A strategic communications plan helps school, district or state department staff set more thoughtful priorities, spend scarce resources more wisely, target activities to key individuals and groups, regularly measure results and, when necessary, make adjustments. Effective public engagement, tied to a coherent plan, is an investment that pays for itself many times over.

This is not just more newsletters or better media "spin." As a communicator, your success will be built on a mix of:

- Listening to teachers, parents and others in the community
- Communicating in terms that make sense to people who are not familiar with education jargon
- Reporting honestly about successes and failures
- Demonstrating to students the benefits of the schools' educational approaches
- Helping parents and communities become educated consumers who can choose wisely among various school improvement approaches
- And perhaps most important, treating the public as customers of the schools. To be successful, you need their permission to do the work they've entrusted to you. Unfortunately, many districts and states often do not act as if permission is required.

Effective communications is about developing shared expectations — among schools and their communities — about what success looks like for students. It is about managing those expectations. It is about rebuilding public trust in schools and strengthening support for and involvement in schools.

This guide draws on expertise from the worlds of politics, marketing and communications. These skills — common to companies, politicians and others — are relatively new to the world of education. Companies like Procter & Gamble spend up to 35% of their annual budgets on community relations, public affairs, public relations, marketing, advertising and similar efforts to communicate with their most important customers. Yet most school districts and education reform groups spend far less than this — about one-half of 1%, according to the National School Public Relations Association. For too many, the idea of communicating effectively translates into well-written press releases. That's not nearly enough.

Nor is a broader communications strategy enough unless it is connected closely to the schools' primary work — teaching and learning. An eloquent speech about how the district is going "back to basics" and stressing order and discipline won't go very far unless the district is actually doing it — and people can see the results.

PUBLIC CONCERN IS GROWING

These are precarious times for public schools. By some measures, schools are doing better than ever before. But by most measures, they are not doing well enough to prepare students for a more challenging world.

As a result, public concern about the quality of schools is growing substantially. Numerous public opinion surveys, including those conducted by ECS and Public Agenda, confirm that improving education has become the public's highest priority, even above such perennial concerns as fighting crime or reducing taxes. The president, governors and business leaders continue to express concern about the quality of schools and propose steps to improve education. Even students are concluding that public schools are not doing well enough. Moreover, there is growing public support for solutions that were once widely considered radical, such as vouchers that can be applied to private school tuition.

Most educators would like to reverse these trends. They care deeply about creating better schools. But they have had a difficult time connecting with the public about the kinds of changes that schools are contemplating.

Typically, a school district or state communications office is understaffed and spends most of its time bouncing from crisis to crisis. There is rarely a plan in place that takes a long-term view toward building public support in a way that is directly connected to the district's efforts to make things better for students. That is the purpose of a strategic communications plan.

For the sake of simplicity, in the rest of this guide we discuss the process as it relates to a school district's work. However, the same guidelines are applicable for state education departments developing strategic communications plans. Examples in the guide come from both districts and states.

BUILDING THE TEAMS

You need the commitment of the top district or state officials to produce a successful strategic communications plan. Until the superintendent and the school board decide that producing and carrying out a strategy for increased public support is a priority, it probably is not worth doing. Invariably, the strategic plan that emerges is likely to call for a school district to do business differently. That is not easy under the best of circumstances, but we believe it is impossible if leaders are unwilling to alter their behavior.

Two keys to producing a workable plan are having enough input from a larger planning team to reflect key views inside and outside the district and having a production team that is small enough to produce and write the plan.

The larger planning team needs enough diversity and confidence to ask and answer tough questions. It needs to make decisions and allocate resources.

Such a team might include the following:

- The superintendent and his or her deputy
- At least one member of the school board
- The district's public information officer (if there is one)

- At least one member of the business community (preferably one with expertise in customer relations or public relations)
- At least one principal and one teacher
- A parent
- A teachers' union leader.

Cincinnati Public Schools

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Director of Public Affairs
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If there are other key groups — outside organizations such as business-school partnerships, parent groups, community organizations or local education foundations — it often makes sense to include their leaders on the planning team, too.

The production team, on the other hand, needs to be both small enough to roll up its sleeves and get the work done and large enough to have perspective. This team might include:

- The district's public information officer
- A businessperson with public relations expertise
- A university public relations specialist or graduate student in communications.

Strategically Cincinnati

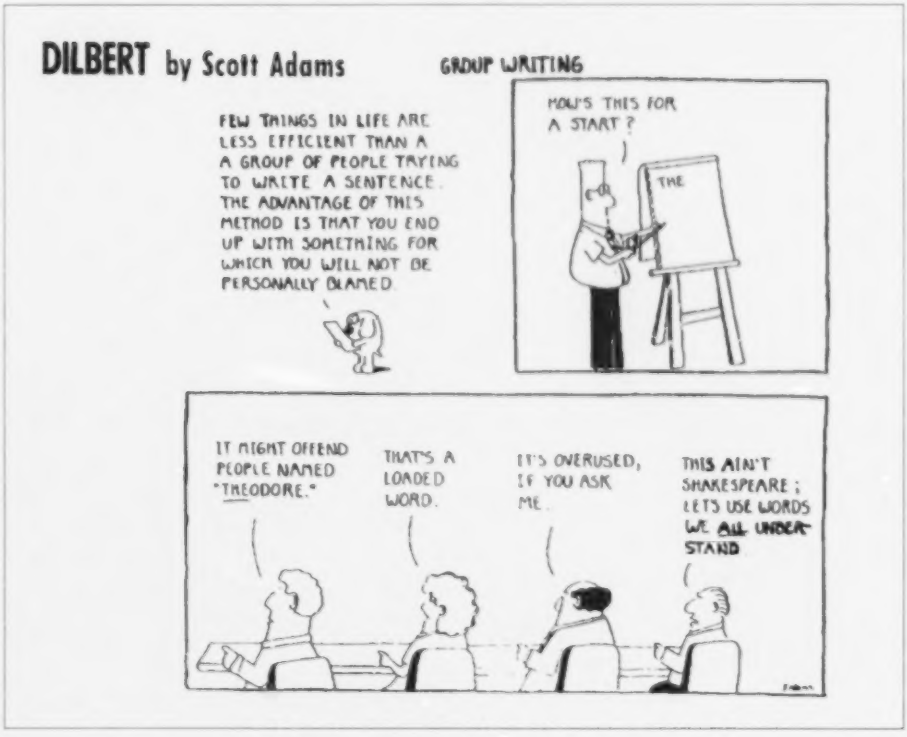
When the Cincinnati Public Schools produced a strategic communications plan in 1996, the team was led by Monica Solomon, the district's public affairs director, and Bill Dobson, a senior communications manager at Procter & Gamble, which is based in Cincinnati. With some outside financial support to help pay for a consultant, the team involved a cross section of the community, including the superintendent, union leaders, involved parents and religious leaders. The group used local and national data, as well as lessons that had been learned elsewhere to produce a strategic plan for Cincinnati that is tied to the district's strategic school improvement plan.

"We'd gone through planning exercises before where the plans just sat on a shelf," said Solomon. "I wanted to be sure that this time we built something that was a living document, one that would be used."

Solomon succeeded. Now she uses the strategic plan to guide all the work of her department. Every few weeks, she and her staff pull out the plan and annotate where they are, what else needs to be done and what adjustments must be made.

And Solomon is also quick to point out that she is not the plan's only owner: The business community and the core supporters who are pushing the district to improve also rely on the plan to help guide their work.

HOW TO DEVELOP YOUR PLAN


DILBERT by Scott Adams
GROUP WRITING
FEW THINGS IN LIFE ARE LESS EFFICIENT THAN A A GROUP OF PEOPLE TRYING TO WRITE A SENTENCE. THE ADVANTAGE OF THIS METHOD IS THAT YOU END UP WITH SOMETHING FOR WHICH YOU WILL NOT BE PERSONALLY BLAMED.
HOW'S THIS FOR A START?
THE
IT MIGHT OFFEND PEOPLE NAMED "THEODORE."
THAT'S A LOADED WORD.
IT'S OVERUSED, IF YOU ASK ME.
THIS AIN'T SHAKESPEARE; LETS USE WORDS WE ALL UNDERSTAND

DILBERT reprinted with permission of United Feature Syndicate, Inc.

The process described in the following pages usually takes at least eight to 12 weeks, although it is not uncommon for it to take longer.

We have seen the following process work well. We encourage you to monitor your progress and results as you go, and prepare to make any necessary mid-course corrections.

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THE FIRST MEETING

Have an initial meeting of the large planning team. The first order of business is to review the district's education priorities with a view to setting goals for the communications plan. *The goals for the communications strategy must be directly linked to the educational goals of the district or state. We cannot emphasize this enough.*

The next step is to begin to address the central communications questions:

- What should we communicate about these educational priorities?
- What would constitute successful communication? What do we need to make happen?
- How will we measure that success?

Make sure answers to these questions are specific. For example, in a district still considering standards, success may be the involvement of a wide range of community members in setting standards. In a district that is putting new academic standards in place, success might be that teachers understand and can explain the standards, and parents know about the standards and how they can help their child meet them. The best way to measure success may be to use surveys of teachers and parents to create a baseline, then set higher targets for each year. In other words, what percent of teachers and parents understands standards now? What percent do you want in a year?

It is important to use this first meeting to review past and current communications plans and programs. Many districts are using some kind of plan, whether strategic or not, and the planning team should review it with an eye toward what has been most and least successful.

At this first meeting, it also can be particularly helpful to present available public opinion research that shows how parents and taxpayers feel about the district's goals and school issues. The public is not monolithic; in fact, there are many publics, each with its own level of understanding and its own expectations of the schools. (More on listening, page 13.)

NEXT STEPS

After setting priorities, the planning team should appoint a smaller subgroup, the production team, that is responsible for answering the questions in the next chapter as it begins drafting a plan.

When the production team has drafted the plan, call a second meeting of the planning team to react to the initial draft. In addition, you should take the draft to a much wider group of reviewers, particularly those from outside the team, such as leaders of the PTA or a citizens advisory council.

Have the production team produce a revised draft, based on this feedback. Then have a third meeting of the planning team to approve the plan, or send it back for another round of revisions.

Finally, publicly present the plan to the school board, to key staff and to key supporters inside and outside the system. Depending on the plan's components, it might be possible to identify individuals or groups who will take responsibility for carrying out specific parts of the plan.

Then, most important of all, begin implementation!

WHAT GOES INTO YOUR PLAN

The hardest part of producing a practical plan is answering tough questions honestly. In the bullets that begin each section of this chapter, we list the questions we believe are the most important. The answers to these questions make up the core of the strategic plan. We also provide excerpts from the plans of several districts.

Key Steps for Building an Effective Communications Plan

1. **Set specific communications goals.**
2. **Listen to what people want.**
3. **Pinpoint whom you need to engage.**
4. **Be clear about what you want to say.**
5. **Use plain English.**
6. **Identify the most effective communicators ... and help them communicate.**
7. **Show student work.**
8. **Design opportunities to communicate.**
9. **Produce materials.**
10. **Get the resources right.**
11. **Set priorities.**
12. **Implement your strategic communications plan.**
13. **Evaluate and adjust your plan.**

1. SET SPECIFIC COMMUNICATIONS GOALS

- For each segment of your public, what does successful communications look like?
- What do you want people to do?
- What do these people want you to do?

School officials should not come back with vague answers, such as "We want the public to support and understand us." The key to the solution here is defining what you actually need various people inside and outside the schools to do for you to meet your goals.

For example, you may need your internal publics such as teachers and principals to appreciate, understand and be able to use new district or state standards. You may need parents to try out new tests so they can see for themselves what their children are expected to be doing. You may need public support for a non-traditional schedule in your schools. Or you may need the taxpayers to vote for a particular ballot issue that is crucial to the schools. And you may need teachers to fundamentally change classroom practice to ensure that all children meet these new, higher standards.

The more specificity that goes into these answers at the front end, the easier it will be for you to design and carry out concrete, practical communication activities that can make success happen.

2. LISTEN TO WHAT PEOPLE WANT

- What do you know about what various segments of the public think of the schools?
- What do you know about what they want to see happen to improve schools?
- How does your internal staff (teachers, principals, janitors — all staff) feel?
- How are they different from the public and taxpayers?
- What would these different groups need to see as evidence that your schools are improving?

Questions such as these underscore a cardinal rule of communications and persuasion: *To get people to support your vision, you need to pay attention to theirs.*

The United States leads the world in public opinion research, but school districts are only starting to use polling and focus groups to better understand how segments of the public feel about schools and education issues. Naturally, the diversity of American society means that you can never fully understand and respond to every concern of every citizen. But you can respond to widely shared issues. The best way to build public support is to understand how various segments of the public feel, share that understanding widely and demonstrate you are working on the issues that are of the most concern to these publics.

Some districts and states have begun to survey their publics regularly — with good success. For instance, when opponents mounted a well-organized campaign against Kentucky's reform program, state legislators believed there was widespread opposition to the reform. However, education supporters used a statewide survey to learn that the opposition, though loud, represented a very small part of the public. That knowledge reassured state legislators, who continued to support the reform law.

In the Edmonds School District near Seattle, a process to understand what kind of standards the public wanted — and didn't want — led to significant revisions of academic standards. Each household received an invitation to participate in determining what students should learn, and approximately 400 people turned out for a first round of discussions. A draft document based on their conclusions was mailed to all households, and a second round of discussions attracted 500 "editors" whose changes were reflected in a second draft. These revised standards are now widely supported.

In Maryland, by conducting a series of focus groups, the state's policymakers got a clear grounding in the concerns of Maryland's parents and teachers about plans to significantly increase the standards for obtaining a high school diploma. The focus groups showed clear support for the higher standards Maryland was putting in place, but the groups also raised questions that state officials needed to address about what will happen to students who don't meet the standards. A subsequent public opinion survey is helping the state target key audiences and spend state money strategically.

You don't have to start from scratch. We have learned a great deal about how the American public feels about schools through our own work and that of other organizations, such as Public Agenda or the annual Phi Delta Kappa-Gallup poll.

- ***Do-It-Yourself Focus Groups: A Low-Cost Way To Listen To Your Community***

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Among the most important lessons we have learned:

- Internal communications is often the most important communications task facing school districts. Teachers — not superintendents or board members — are the most credible source of information about schools for parents. But just handing teachers a packet of information about school changes is not enough to help teachers support the policies and understand them well enough to describe them clearly. Teachers should be involved in any changes that are being considered.
- The good news is that, based on recent A-Plus and ECS surveys, the general public will accept many different kinds of evidence of improvement. Our polls reveal that the public is looking for more than test scores as indicators schools are getting better. People are looking to see, for example, whether parents are meaningfully involved, whether facilities are clean, whether students have textbooks, and whether the schools are safe and free of violence.
- The public's patience is wearing thin. Many people are looking with increasing interest at nontraditional options within the public school system, such as charter schools and choice, as well as options outside the public system. Schools need to demonstrate that they are improving and communicate this clearly to the public.

A final point about data: It's important to report back to those you surveyed. Show them that you listened and fixed — or at least tried to fix — problems they brought to your attention. You honor people by asking them their opinions; you insult them by ignoring those views.

3. PINPOINT WHOM YOU NEED TO ENGAGE

- Which people, inside and outside the system, do you have to reach to be successful?

The list might include:

- Teachers
- Principals
- Central office staff
- Parents
- Students
- Taxpayers
- Media
- Business community
- Higher education officials
- Policymakers (school board, city council, state board, legislature, mayor)

☛ **"Getting Inside the Public's Head"**
***Education Week*, May 28, 1997**

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☛ ***America's Schools Must Change ... But Can They?***

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The truth is that all these groups are important. Still, you may find it helpful to create a matrix to identify which of these publics are most important to your success on any given issue.

For example, parents and business people are likely to be very interested in the district's new academic standards, but not particularly interested in the district's new strategies for professional development.

Again, whom you need to reach is tied directly to the education goals of your district. Not every person or group is vital; not everyone needs to be reached. In a world of unlimited resources, it would be nice to try to reach nearly every group. But we know of no school district or state with adequate resources for such a giant task; you would do better to plan which groups to reach, and stick to that plan. Remember, strategic planning is about setting priorities that allow you to spend communications resources efficiently and wisely.

☛ ***Listen, Discuss and Act: Parents' and Teachers' Views on Education Reform***

Education Commission of the States
707 17th St.
Suite 2700
Denver, CO 80202
303-299-3692
303-296-8332 (fax)

☛ ***Working with the News Media***

American Association of School Administrators
1801 North Moore St.
Arlington, VA 22209
703-528-0700
703-841-1543 (fax)

Using the Media

People have a tendency to put an enormous amount of emphasis on working with the media. While media relations are extremely important, keep in mind that surveys show that there are many other communications vehicles that have a greater impact than the media. For instance, ECS research *(Listen, Discuss and Act)* indicates that parents look to teachers, students and other parents for information about the schools far more than they look to newspapers, television or radio.

It is true, however, that media relations are a key component of a strategic communications plan. In general, there are three opportunities to work with the media: when you bring a story idea or issue to them; when you contact the media to cover a specific event; and when a reporter wants to do a story about changes underway in the schools or something that has happened in a school. To make the most of these opportunities, we suggest that you supplement regular news releases about progress made and big events with efforts to build personal relationships with individual reporters. It also will be important that you provide media and communications training to teachers and other key staff. (For an excellent guide to working with the media, see *Working with the News Media* by the American Association of School Administrators.)

4. BE CLEAR ABOUT WHAT YOU WANT TO SAY

An important part of your strategic communications plan is having clear, concise messages. Consider the following questions:

- What are you saying now?
- Which messages are working? Which are not? How do you know?
- What messages capture what you are trying to do and meet the needs of your most important customers?
- How will you create new messages?

Many of your different publics will require a message that is focused differently. For example, in many places, district leaders talk about "systemic reform" or "restructuring." However, we've learned through research that parents and most others outside the system don't connect to these big-picture concepts. Taxpayers, for instance, want to see evidence that their money is being spent efficiently. For that reason, the Rochester, New York, school district has developed very specific public targets for academic success (percentage improvements in reading, for example) and then tied its annual budget explicitly to these benchmarks; that way, everyone can see whether the spending has been targeted effectively.

In another example, if your work involves setting standards, the message for teachers is likely to focus on classroom practice, whereas for parents the message likely will focus more on how the standards will help their children learn more and learn better.

The communications gap between educators and the public can be huge. Public Agenda first pointed out this phenomenon in 1991 in *Crosstalk: The Public, the Experts & Competitiveness*; these findings have been amplified repeatedly since then. Education reformers, for instance, focus on higher standards, more authentic assessments and school governance changes. But most parents are initially more worried about such things as safety and discipline in schools, whether their children have books and computers, and whether the bathrooms are clean. They want reassurance that these basics are being handled before they will turn their attention to the other issues put forth by educators. The message from parents is, "If educators can't handle the things we are interested in, why should we trust them with anything else?"

☛ **Rochester City School District**

Barbara Jarzynecki
Rochester City
School District
131 West Broad St.
Rochester, NY 14614
716-262-8525
716-263-3225 (fax)

☛ ***Crosstalk: The Public, the Experts & Competitiveness***

Public Agenda
6 East 39th St.
New York, NY 10016
212-686-6610
212-889-3461 (fax)

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5. USE PLAIN ENGLISH

- Are you using insider jargon?
- Are your messages straightforward enough that they can be easily understood by nonexperts?

Jargon
Education Commission of the States
707 17th St.
Suite 2700
Denver, CO 80202
303-299-3692
303-296-8332 (fax)

As we've already pointed out, the concept of "systemic reform" means nothing to most people. For others, it means you're talking about something that will never happen, at least not in their lifetime. Instead, you might do better to focus on improving or strengthening schools.

Expecting More: Higher Standards for Chicago's Students
Chicago Public Schools
Office of Accountability
1819 West Pershing Rd.
4W(n)
Chicago, IL 60609
773-535-2995
773-535-4168 (fax)

Even the phrase "school reform" raises questions. We've often put that phrase in front of a group of parents, who respond: "Sounds a lot like reform school, doesn't it?" For a quick, clear picture of how obscure education jargon can be, look at the ECS video *Jargon*, which offers a humorous look at how education jargon gets in the way of understanding and clear communication.

A Handbook for Parents: Performance Standards for a World-Class Education
John W. Williams
Community Relations Manager
Beaufort County School District
Post Office Drawer 309
1300 King Street
Beaufort, SC 29901
803-525-4200
803-525-4324 (fax)

And language has to be believable. When educators talk about "all children achieving at high world-class levels," people tend to focus on students who might be exceptions (e.g., the severely learning disabled). But change "high world-class levels" to "much higher levels" and you've turned a lot of skeptics into believers. Is there anyone who doesn't believe that American students can do better?

School districts as varied as Chicago, with 421,000 students, and Beaufort, South Carolina, with 10,000 students, have produced plain-English versions of their academic standards for parents and others outside the schools. Cincinnati is taking this one step farther by developing versions of their standards in language that a third-grade student would use to describe them. A science standard that says "Students will make predictions from a series of events" has been translated into: "I can tell you what a life cycle is. I can tell you what the cycle of seasons is. For example, I can tell you that the changes in the size of the moon are a pattern. I can use charts to explain patterns and make predictions."

Use everyday language and images — the kind that make sense to people standing in line at the grocery store or on the sidelines at a soccer game or sitting in the hairdresser's chair. For instance, IBM Chairman Lou Gerstner helps people understand the importance of meeting high standards by pointing out "you don't score points in basketball if the ball gets close to the goal." Similarly, Colorado

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Governor Roy Romer illustrates the importance of hands-on learning and testing by talking about airplane pilots; people whose eyes glaze over at the term "performance assessment" readily agree that it doesn't matter if the pilot can pass a written test on landing an aircraft — what matters is if the pilot can get the plane safely to the ground. If you cannot connect the work you are doing to people's lives, they will be unlikely to understand and support you.

Philadelphia Teacher

Children Achieving Challenge
Greater Philadelphia First Foundation
1818 Market St.
Suite 3510
Philadelphia, PA 19103
215-575-2200
215-575-2222 (fax)

Take Care of the Fundamentals

Proactive message development and outreach is all too easily — and all too often — undermined by a rude secretary, an unreturned phone call, and buildings and grounds that are not well-maintained. That's why Seattle has put such an emphasis on everyday improvements, such as answering the phone by the third ring. Common courtesy, common sense and customer service go a long way in communicating competence. If people don't believe you can do what they see as everyday tasks, they certainly won't trust you to do the more difficult work of better educating their children.

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6. IDENTIFY THE MOST EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATORS ... AND HELP THEM COMMUNICATE

- For each segment of the public, who are the most credible communicators?
- What will help them get across the message about school improvement?

We have learned from research that parents trust teachers above all. But most districts do a poor job of helping teachers understand how their work in the classroom connects to the district's overall agenda. Moreover, teachers rarely get information in a timely manner or receive training in the communications skills they need to better explain their work to parents, students and others in the community. An exception to this pattern is Philadelphia, where an outside nonprofit group publishes a monthly newsletter that is mailed directly to the homes of the district's 13,000 teachers and school staff; the goal is to help them see how their colleagues in classrooms around the city are starting to carry out some of the district's improvements.

We also have learned that articulate students have great credibility with parents and others in the community when talking about high standards and accom-

plishment. The Public Education Foundation in Edmonds, Washington, hosts a business breakfast fundraiser each year and brings in students to captivate architects, attorneys and accountants with their demonstrations of what they have learned. Displays of mathematical problem-solving and research projects consistently prompt ovations and the response: "I never did that kind of work in fourth grade!"

Edmonds Public Education Foundation

Sylvia Soholt
Community Relations Manager
Edmonds School District
20420 68th Ave. West
Lynnwood, WA 98036
206-670-7044
206-670-7006 (fax)

Use everybody. Clear communications isn't just a job for the superintendent, board chair or "district spokesperson." The most successful districts take steps to make sure lots of people — from bus drivers to secretaries to classroom teachers to parents — are comfortable talking about the work of schools.

Maryland Department of Education

Ron Peiffer
Assistant State Superintendent
Maryland State Dept. of Education
200 W. Baltimore St.
Baltimore, MD 21201
410-767-0473
410-333-6033 (fax)

In part this goes back to good internal communications; making sure that district employees actually have good, timely information. It also relates to the issue of training. Those most often on the communications front lines, particularly teachers and principals, need opportunities to understand the people they are trying to communicate with, the messages they need to deliver, and the most effective opportunities for them to do so. For instance, Maryland teaches hundreds of teachers during the summer not only how to score the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program, but also how to explain the assessments to colleagues and parents.

7. SHOW STUDENT WORK

Seeing is believing. If you're rewriting standards and developing new assessments, give people a chance to see for themselves what this new effort looks like and to participate in its development, where possible and practical.

Make liberal use of actual student work so that parents and others can see for themselves that, far from "dumbing down" the curriculum, the best of these new standards are challenging students to think, be creative and put their knowledge to use.

For instance, New Standards, an organization that designs and promotes high academic standards, made student work the centerpiece of its three volumes of standards for what students in elementary, middle and high school are expected to do in math, science, English and applied learning (which calls on students to do multi-disciplinary projects). About 80 percent of each book is excerpts from actual student work, so that teachers, parents and other readers can actually see for themselves what constitutes "good" work.

Showing Progress

Part of strategic communications is showing the gains you are making. You can show continuous progress in various ways, including:

- **Expanded report card with grades and other ways to show student progress, such as exhibitions and portfolios**
- **Improvement in test scores**
- **Statistics about students, such as dropout or attendance rates, reduction in disciplinary actions, etc.**
- **Anecdotal information from teachers, students, administrators and parents about students being more actively involved in their own learning and achievement**
- **Results from surveys of attitudes about what is happening in the schools**
- **Ways resources have been allocated and new ones developed**
- **Nature and extent of partnerships, such as those with social agencies, libraries, postsecondary institutions, businesses, etc.**

A good example of showing progress can be found in the "Making A Difference" section of the ATLAS home page.

- **New Standards home page**
  http://www.ncee.org/OurPrograms/nsPage.html
- **Accelerated Learning Laboratory home page**
  http://nis.accel.worc.k12.ma.us
- **ATLAS school design home page**
  http://www.edc.org/FSC/ATLAS

Good examples of student work also can be found on the World Wide Web. The Web site of Accelerated Learning Laboratory School in Worcester, Massachusetts, features student work, accessed through the students' own home pages. And the ATLAS school reform network home page has an excellent summary of a school project, found under the heading "What's new in ATLAS classrooms?"

When they see the actual work, people understand the difference between merely having students memorize the rules of grammar — the basics — and being able to use these rules to write a persuasive letter to the editor of the local paper or a letter to a prospective boss. They see for themselves that the best new assessments and curriculum give students the basics — and a lot more.

Without this evidence, however, an already skeptical public will become even more skeptical that educators actually can deliver on their promises of helping students acquire the "higher-order thinking skills" and other capabilities that reformers are promoting.

8. DESIGN OPPORTUNITIES TO COMMUNICATE

- Which forums, which formats, which media are the best ways of connecting to each audience?
- Which mechanisms are you using now? How effectively? How do you know whether or not they are effective?
- What else do you need to do?

The options are limitless: face-to-face meetings, newsletters, videos, information tables in shopping malls, regular talk shows on your local radio and cable TV stations, and so on. Allocate time at PTA meetings for presentations about the standards. Use half-time periods at athletic events for "ads" about the standards created by students. Schedule student-led parent conferences where students give their views on the new standards.

You can even find ways to plug into a community's existing "rumor mill." If you've forgotten how quickly news can travel through your community, rent the video *Steel Magnolias* and observe the rapid transfer of information in Dolly Parton's beauty shop.

Of course, there are costs associated with each of these. Consider partnering with a local business to help defray costs such as producing videos or printing newsletters. Having a strategic plan should help you allocate your resources wisely, so you can choose which opportunities will yield the most "bang for the buck."

9. PRODUCE THE MATERIALS YOU NEED TO COMMUNICATE

- What materials do you need to clearly communicate with the people you most need to reach?
- How do you document the successes you have now?
- How can you take advantage of new technologies?

For example, if you are moving toward new standards, you likely will need a set of materials that includes a brochure about the standards for parents, an explanation of the standards for students — "This is what you need to accomplish" — and materials that help teachers communicate the standards to both parents and students.

Too few districts take the time and effort to capture their success stories in clear language and graphics, but these success stories are necessary to demonstrate evi-

dence of progress to skeptical parents, members of the media or even to teachers and principals, who may not be aware of the gains the district is making.

As video has become cheaper, it is possible to creatively capture information on videotape that can be shared widely throughout a district. Some important considerations when producing a video: How much will it cost? How long a "shelf-life" will it have? Is it the best way to reach the intended audience? Video is one of the most powerful ways to show people what is happening in the classroom. For example, you can produce a five-minute video that gives parents an idea of what a more active classroom looks like and send it home for them to watch at a convenient time. Edmonds School District, in Washington, has produced a video by teachers, for teachers, that effectively communicates about standards.

☛ **Edmonds School District Video**

Sylvia Soholt
Community Relations Manager
Edmonds School District
20420 68th Ave. West
Lynnwood, WA 98036
206-670-7044
206-670-7006 (fax)

More and more homes have access to the Internet, and districts are using a mix of electronic mail and sites on the World Wide Web to reach parents and teachers far more quickly than they could through any printed form. Other districts have increased their use of local cable systems to reach teachers, parents and taxpayers. Each of these technologies requires some expertise. If no one in your school or district already knows how to use them, consider teaming up with a local business that does.

10. GET THE RESOURCES RIGHT

- What financial resources are used now for communications and public engagement?
- What others are available within the district?
- What additional resources, if any, are required?

Local companies, business groups and philanthropies sometimes help underwrite this work — either with money or technical assistance. It also may be possible to make internal funding more secure if you can incorporate communications work into the administration budget, rather than have it as a separate area that is open to cutbacks.

When looking at resources, one question is tough — but essential: What communications activities are not getting the message across? For instance, if you learn through surveys and focus groups that your newsletter is not widely read, channel those resources into other activities that would have greater impact.

11. SET PRIORITIES

- Given the level of resources, what are your priorities?
- What should be done first?
- What should be done next?
- What should be done only when new resources become available?

You will never have enough resources to do everything. The key here is to use the resources you do have not simply to get the job done, but to get it done right.

12. IMPLEMENT YOUR STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

- Are you doing what you said you'd do?

It may sound obvious, but make sure you carry out the plan. (You'd be amazed at how many people do not!) The planning process should have ensured that you have the backing you need from district or state leadership, as well as the necessary resources. To quote the sports shoe commercial, "Just do it."

13. EVALUATE AND ADJUST YOUR PLAN

- How can you gather the feedback you need?
- What measures will you use to determine how well you are doing?
- How good is good enough?

One good way to get feedback is to do random sampling telephone surveys, particularly to give you a baseline of community attitudes about your schools. Other methods include written surveys, "listening teams" (members of your community who are asked to keep an ear to the ground and to report what they learn at meetings you set up) and more traditional public hearings or town hall meetings. Our experience is that most public hearings produce lots of talk and very little listening. We have found more success by structuring meetings comprised of small groups that focus on defined topics, each with a prepared facilitator.

When you collect information on your community's beliefs about its schools, it is important to feed that information back to the community. This will let them know that you are listening and have paid attention to what you heard. It also can help counter the criticism of a vocal minority by giving voice to the "silent majority" of people who support the schools.

It also is possible to mix listening and giving information in meetings. For example, use report card nights, family math nights or open houses that encourage the public to see (and touch) the changes that have occurred in schools.

Just as schools are often measured by inputs (funding, teacher qualifications) and outcomes (student attendance, achievement, drop-out rates), we can measure and adjust communications with a similar mixture. For example, one measure of an input might be whether you actually produced the brochure for parents that was part of your plan. How well was it produced and distributed? Meanwhile, the outcome should look at whether the work made a difference. Do more parents understand what you are trying to do as a result? How can you tell?

For example, Cincinnati leaders survey teachers annually to understand how they feel about their jobs, how well they understand the district's strategic vision and their role in it, whether they feel the schools are getting better or worse, and what they need to see to believe progress is being made. The district also set up a "hotline" for teachers to call with complaints and suggestions and for further information, and it tracks the type of calls that come in. In this district, the goals are to increase the number of teachers who understand their role in the district's vision by 15% annually, and to produce a series of brochures within one year for teachers at elementary, middle and high school levels.

Similarly, Maryland's strategic plan calls for an annual survey of parents to learn how much they know about what their children must do to meet new state standards and whether they support those standards. The plan also calls for measuring the number of calls parents make to state and local districts asking for information about the standards. The state's goal is to increase the number of parents who understand the program by 15% annually, produce a brochure for all parents within one year and create a database of parents who can be sent information by computer.

☛ **Education Commission of the States**

See the ECS publication, *Let's Talk About Education Improvement*, which provides an example of how to combine instruction and discussion during meetings.

☛ **Cincinnati**

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☛ **Maryland Department of Education**

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CONCLUSION

Strategic communications planning is not a panacea. If it is done thoughtfully, however, this work can make a difference in building public understanding and support for schools.

It is hard work — and work that the education community traditionally has not done. But more districts and states are finding that it is worth the investment to communicate more clearly and involve more people in making changes.

We have tried in this guide to offer you a useful process, along with some experience from states and school districts around the country. The next section lists resources that can help you. A few years ago, there were few places to turn to for communications help. Today, there are many more resources and many more people doing this work successfully.

USEFUL RESOURCES

A-PLUS COMMUNICATIONS

2200 Clarendon Boulevard, Suite 1102, Arlington, VA 22201; 703-524-7325; 703-528-9692 (fax); adam@ksagroup.com (e-mail); www.ksagroup.com/aplus

"Getting Inside the Public's Head," *Education Week*, 5/28/97.

"Engaging the Public," Adam Kernan-Schloss and Andy Plattner, 1996.

"Are We Expecting Too Much from Public Engagement?" *Education Week*, 4/19/95.

Priority One: Schools That Work, for California Public Education Partnership, June 1996.

What Washington Wants: High Expectations, High Standards, High Achievement, for Partnership for Learning, 1997.

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

1801 North Moore St., Arlington, VA 22209-9988; 703-528-0700; 703-841-1543 (fax); http://www.aasa.org

The School Administrator, Vol. 53, Number 10 (focus on communications and common ground) November, 1996.

How to Avoid Crossfire and Seek Common Ground, 1995.

How Smart Schools Get and Keep Community Support, 1994.

Working With the News Media, 1993.

EDUCATION COMMISSION OF THE STATES

707 17th Street, Suite 2700, Denver CO 80202-3427; 303-299-3692; 303-296-8332 (fax); ecs@ecs.org (e-mail); http://www.ecs.org

Do-It-Yourself Focus Groups: A Low-Cost Way to Listen to Your Community, 1997.

So You Have Standards...Now What?, 1997.

America's Public Schools Must Change...But Can They?, 1997.

Let's Talk About Education Improvement, 1996.

Listen, Discuss and Act: Parents' and Teachers' Views on Education Reform, 1996.

Jargon (video that takes a light-hearted look at the language of education), 1995.

Politics (video that looks at one state's attempt to develop and enact education reform legislation), 1995.

How to Deal With Community Criticism of School Change, 1993.

What Communities Should Know and Be Able to Do About Education, 1993.

NATIONAL EDUCATION GOALS PANEL

1850 M Street, NW, Suite 270, Washington, DC 20036, 202-632-0952

Community Action Tool Kit, 1994.

NATIONAL SCHOOL PUBLIC RELATIONS ASSOCIATION

15948 Derwood Rd., Rockville, MD 20855; 301-519-0496; 301-519-0494 (fax); nspra@nspra.org (e-mail)

Win at the Polls, 1995.

The ABC Complete Book of School Surveys, 1992.

School Communication Workshop Kit, 1991.

NEW AMERICAN SCHOOLS

1000 Wilson Blvd., Suite 2710, Arlington, VA 22209; 703-908-9500; 703-908-0622 (fax); http://www.naschools.com

How to Engage Educators, Parents and the Community in Design-Based School Change, (available fall 1997).

NEW STANDARDS

National Center on Education and the Economy, 700 11th Street NW, Suite 750, Washington, DC 20001; 202-783-3668; 202-783-3672 (fax); http://www.ncee.org

Effective Public Engagement, 1993.

New Standards Student Performance Standards, Volumes 1-3, 1996.

PHI DELTA KAPPA INTERNATIONAL, INC.

408 N. Union, P.O. Box 789, Bloomington, IN 47402; 800-766-1156; 812-339-0018 (fax); headquarters@pdkintl.org (e-mail); http://www.pdkintl.org

"Engaging the Public With Its Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan*, June 1997.

PACE (Polling Attitudes of Community on Education) products

PUBLIC AGENDA

6 East 39th Street, New York, NY 10016; 212-686-6610; 212-889-3461 (fax); pubag1@ix.netcom.com (e-mail); http://www.publicagenda.org (available after Labor Day)

Getting By: What American Teenagers Really Think About Their Schools, 1997.

Given the Circumstances: Teachers Talk About Public Education Today, 1996.

Assignment Incomplete: The Unfinished Business of Education Reform, 1995.

First Things First: What Americans Expect from the Public Schools, 1994.

The Broken Contract: Connecticut Citizens Look at Public Education, December 1994.

Divided Within, Besieged Without: The Politics of Education in Four American School Districts, 1993.

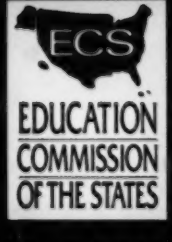
Crosstalk: The Public, the Experts and Competitiveness, 1991.

STUDY CIRCLES RESOURCE CENTER

P.O. Box 203, Pomfret, CT 06528; 860-928-2616; 860-928-3713 (fax); scrc@neca.com (e-mail)

Education: How Can Schools and Communities Work Together to Meet the Challenge?, 1995.

A-Plus Communications
2200 Clarendon Boulevard, Suite 1102
Arlington, Virginia 22201
703-524-7325
FAX 703-528-9692
e-mail: adam@ksagroup.com
http://www.ksagroup.com/ksa/a-plus/



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